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THE AGE OF HOMER

ABOVE all other works of poetic art, in the full sense of that term, are the dramas of Shakespeare and the poems of Homer. In what other poems, except in Shakespeare's dramas, shall we find such a galaxy of characters, so varied and so sustained, as we find in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? In the *Aeneid* there can hardly be said to be more than one character, while that one is wanting in interest. In Dante the characters are historical. In *Paradise Lost* there is but one, which represents the majesty of evil. The deity is abstract deity; the angels are angels; the pictures of Adam and Eve, however beautiful in their way, are pictures of perfect innocence. Where else shall we find such a wealth of vignettes in the form of similes? Where such a picture of conjugal love as the parting of Hector and Andromache? Where such a fairy-tale as the *Odyssey* with the Isle of Calypso, Circe, the Sirens, the Lotus-eaters, the hall of Aeolus, the Phaeacians? How completely have these creations of a poet of the dawn taken hold on the imagination of the world! The least artistic passages in appearance are the recurrences of commonplace descriptions of commonplace matters, such as navigation, sacrifice and feasting; yet even these have more the air of refrain than of careless repetition. Moral blemishes, such as the repulsive character of Athene, or the atrocities ascribed to Achilles, are faults of primitive ethics or national prejudices, not failures of art. Wonderfully close Homer comes to us across the ages. Modern pathos can go no deeper than Andromache lamenting that her Hector, slain by Achilles, will not from his death-bed stretch out his arms to her and say that pregnant word (*πυκνὸν ἔπος*), on which she might brood amidst her tears for the rest of her days. Sentimental appreciation of the picturesque we do not expect in a primitive and unspiritual age, any more than we expect romantic love; but the Homeric descriptions of the sea, the storm, the calm,

the star-lit heavens, imply on the part of the writer something at least of the emotion which they awaken in us. The descriptions of the dreamer's sensations<sup>1</sup> and of the play of the wanderer's memory are wonderfully modern in their refinement and subtlety. Nor, if our ears tell us true, in spite of probable differences of pronunciation, is the metrical art in these poems inferior to their poetic excellence. Instances without number might be cited of what sounds to us the happy adaptation of the music of a passage to its sense. The lines describing Jupiter's nod of assent<sup>2</sup> is one of them.

To find a time and place before recorded civilization at which poetic art can have reached a height only once afterwards attained, is the Homeric problem, very interesting, and at the same time very tantalizing, since means of a chronological solution we have none. We can only hope to determine the political, social and aesthetic date.

The single authorship of the *Odyssey* is not much contested, and that of the *Iliad* seems to me hardly contestable. The patchwork theory, started by Wolf and carried to an extreme length by Lachmann, was the offspring of a Germany whose learning at that time was greater than her taste and judgment. The theory of Grote, who regards the *Iliad* as a nucleus with superadditions, is not the result of original investigation but is the Wolf-Lachmann theory in full retreat. Editorial patching in places there may have been. This was likely enough in the course of transmission and revision. It must surely be seen that the unity of the *Iliad* is not mechanical but organic; that the parts would bleed if torn asunder. Did one poet sing the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, another its consequences, and a third their reconciliation? Did one poet write the part in which the Greeks were defeated, and another balance it by their success? Did one poet produce the Andromache of the sixth *Iliad*, and another re-produce her in the last? If the unity of the *Odyssey* is admitted, if it is impossible to suppose that one poet described Ulysses in Calypso's Isle yearning for his home, and that other poets carried him through a series of adventures to the fulfilment of his desire, why should we think a multiplicity of poets necessary to the production of the *Iliad*?

I almost as thoroughly believe in the common authorship of the two poems. The theme of the *Odyssey* is more romantic and less heroic than that of the *Iliad*, and the style is suitable to the subject. In the last books there is undoubtedly a falling off, which might be the natural consequence of exhaustion or old age. But even here such passages as the meeting of Ulysses with his dog Argos, and

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, XXII. 199-201.

<sup>2</sup> *Iliad*, I. 528-530.

the comparison of the flitting of the souls of the suitors to the flitting of bats disturbed in their cranny<sup>1</sup> bespeak the peerless hand. There are, no doubt, *nisi prius* objections to the common authorship. But poetry is not judiciable in the court of *nisi prius*. It is passing strange, no doubt, that after a ten years' siege Priam should be asking Helen to point out to him the chiefs of the besieging army. But it is not Priam, it is the reader or hearer of the bard who wants the information. It is passing strange that in Sophocles Oedipus should have sat so long on his throne without seeking to know what had become of his predecessor. It is passing strange that in *Paradise Lost* Omnipotence, having shut up Satan in hell, should fail to keep him there, and that Omniscience should be ignorant of his flight. There are discrepancies in the Homeric poems about the age of Neoptolemus, and the chronology of Telemachus's voyage of inquiry after his father, which might be damaging under forensic cross-examination. The strongest point against the identity of the author of the *Odyssey* and the author of the *Iliad* is the discrepancy about the wife of Hephaestus, who in the *Iliad* is Charis, while in the *Odyssey* she is Aphrodite and the heroine of a queer story. But Homer makes pretty free with his pantheon. What are these things set in the balance against agreement in the delineation of a strongly-marked and complex character such as that of Ulysses; or against general identity of thought, sentiment, manner, and versification? Great, surely, would be the chances against the production by different writers of two poems equal in scale and so uniform in genius and harmonizing in details as to have been generally taken for works of the same hand. Inferior epic writers of the Cycle evidently spread themselves over a wide canvas, taking as their theme the whole history of the Trojan war from Leda's egg. But alike in the case of the *Iliad* and that of the *Odyssey*, the writer prefers a narrow canvas; in the *Iliad*, a single incident of the siege of Troy; in the *Odyssey*, a limited portion of the adventures of Ulysses; his strength lying in careful painting of character, in dialogue, and in fulness of descriptive detail. The case for common authorship might almost rest on this identity of selection and treatment. However, whether the two poems are by the same author or not, there can be no doubt that they are contemporary and products of the same school. This is sufficiently proved by the identity of language, and the occurrence of the same standard phrases in them both.

Herodotus, whose authority as to the date of these poems is commonly accepted, puts Homer and Hesiod four hundred years

<sup>1</sup> *Odyssey*, XXIV. 6-9.

and not more before his own time. Herodotus is a charming writer ; he gives us an inestimable picture of Greek life ; but of critical accuracy as to facts he has been abundantly shown to be destitute. To give one more instance, he makes the fleet of Xerxes lose upwards of seven hundred sail by battle or storm between its arrival at Sepias Akte and its arrival at Phalerum. Yet he tells us that the loss was made up by contingents from Carystus in Euboea, Andros, Tenos, and the other Cyclades ; so that the number of the fleet at Phalerum was about what it had been on its arrival at Sepias Akte. Seven hundred sail from a little town and a few petty islands ! The numbers of the army of Xerxes pass belief ; the details of his march are evidently poetic, and the narrative of the battle of Marathon bewilders the commentators and will bewilder them to the end of time. Yet the invasion of Greece by Xerxes fell within the historian's life-time, and he must have had abundant access to contemporary information.

Four centuries seems a wide gap to be spanned. Comparing the language of Herodotus with that of Homer, and making due allowance for poetic form and license, it appears unlikely that there should have been so wide an interval between the two. There are perhaps in Homer from twelve to twenty words which are so archaic, that it puzzles the acumen of Buttmann to determine their meaning. There are peculiarities of inflection and syntax of which it would be difficult to say what proportions are archaic, poetic, or idiosyncratic. As to the use of the digamma, Monro seems doubtful. But the language is in all respects vitally the same as that of Ionian writers, and we can use the Homeric poems in our schools and colleges as a text-book of poetic Greek.

That there should have been any great tribal cataclysm after the composition of the poems seems therefore hardly possible. From the time of Homer to that of Pisistratus the continuity of race and language must apparently have remained unbroken. This it can hardly have done for four hundred years. Had a tribal cataclysm taken place, the invading tribe would hardly have adopted the heroes, legends, and ballads of the conqueror.

That the art of poetry, or any art, should have reached perfection, an unapproachable perfection, at a bound is incredible. There must have been a considerable period of preparation ; and if we throw the date of Homer back to the dawn of Greek nationality, where is this period to be found ?

Some assume that Homer does not mention writing, and hence infer that he lived before its invention. Had he any occasion to mention it ? He surely, however, does mention it plainly enough.

He says<sup>1</sup> that Bellerophon was charged by Proetus with folded tablets wherein Proetus had written things full of deadly import. That such poems as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* might have been transmitted by memory is undeniable. Memory, it is truly said, would be stronger before the general use of writing; and even in our day we have had a man who could say by heart a great number of the plays of Shakespeare. The difficulty would be, not in the transmission without writing, but in the composition. How could the adjustment of parts, the elaboration of the plot, the touching and retouching which a work of high art implies, be performed without means of keeping the work before the composer's mind? Milton was blind when he composed *Paradise Lost*, but it would be written down from his dictation and read over to him for improvement and revision.

The political era of the *Iliad* is plainly fixed. It is the era of democracy lifting its head against nobility and hereditary rule. Thersites is the democratic agitator, hated by the bard who sings in royal or aristocratic halls, and who paints him a monster of ugliness most hateful to a race which adored beauty, as well as a paragon of moral vileness; exults in the chastisement inflicted on him, and makes the people sympathize with the chieftain who inflicts it, as he undoubtedly wishes the crowd in the agora would do. The passage is in spirit cognate to one in Theognis. It is not likely that the course of political events should have twice travelled the same round. The chiefs preside in the public assembly and lead, perhaps dictate, its councils; but there is a public assembly and the need of popular assent is felt. Public opinion is repeatedly personified by *τις*, as in the *Iliad* II. 271: “ὥδ'ε δὲ τις εἰπὲσσεν ἰδὼν ἐς πηλεΐον ἄλλον.” Telemachus in the assembly of Ithaca summoned by him makes a direct appeal to the people. All this bespeaks a transition from monarchy and aristocracy to democracy, such as the Greek colonies in Asia Minor evidently underwent, and probably from their maritime and adventurous character, their novelty, and the volatile spirit which in Herodotus they exhibit, more rapidly than it was undergone by the communities of old Greece.

Oratory is greatly valued and has reached high perfection, which, without a popular audience, it could hardly have done. The description of Ulysses as an orator<sup>2</sup> indicates careful study of the art. Law is, like the Brehon law, traditional not statutory; justice is rudimentary, being administered by chiefs or elders who are jurymen as well as judges. But the Greeks never showed much apti-

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, VI. 169.

<sup>2</sup> *Iliad*, III. 216-224.

tude for jurisprudence ; nor did they ever arrive at the separation of the functions of the judge from those of the jury. The Areopagus and the Heliaea were jury-courts without a judge, the Heliaea on a democratic footing and scale.

That Homer had predecessors, that his art did not spring into existence out of a void, we might be sure without his telling us. However, he tells us so himself when he prays to the Muse, to impart to him *also* his share of her lore : “ τῶν ἀμύθεν γε, θεὰ, θύγατερ Διὸς, εἰπὲ καὶ ἡμῖν.”<sup>1</sup> Both in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, but especially in the *Iliad*, he clearly assumes that the characters whom he is bringing on the scene are already known to his audience. Patroclus is introduced by him as “ Menoetiades.” He does not, before proceeding to sing the wrath of Achilles, tell you who Achilles was, who Agamemnon was, or what brought them together on the scene. The siege of Troy was evidently a theme as familiar to his audience as the siege of Jerusalem would be to the audience of Tasso.

Art in the Homeric poems is evidently ideal. The shield of Achilles utterly transcends anything of which relics have been left or that possibly could have been created in that, or indeed in any, day. But ideals are not found without some reality to suggest and support them. Aesthetic aspirations at all events were high. If with these advances toward intellectual civilization we are surprised at finding homicide prevalent and punished only as a private wrong by private vengeance, piracy and marauding licensed, a general reliance for security on the strong hand rather than on public law, no quarter given in battle, and such atrocities as the dragging of Hector behind the chariot of Achilles round the walls of Troy, the sacrifice of twelve Trojan captives at the funeral of Patroclus, or the hideous acts of vengeance committed by Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, we may bear in mind that in Italy contemporary with the divine artists, the famous writers, and the pioneers of science were the life of crime and violence depicted in the Memoirs of Benvenuto Cellini, the hunger tower, the torture-houses of the Visconti, the Borgias, and the Bravi. At Athens, in her most intellectual era, there is much savagery. The people vote the massacre of the whole of Mitylene ; they actually massacre all the Mitylenians who had come into their own hands. They massacre the Melians for simply standing a siege. The factions at Corcyra behaved like Red Indians. Human sacrifice had ceased, but the existence of the word *φαρμακός*, a scape-goat, shows that it had not been unknown at Athens. The license of piracy when exercised against foreign ships was prolonged well into historic times.<sup>2</sup> Alexander, the much adored, not only

<sup>1</sup> *Odyssey*, I. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, I. 166.

emulated but greatly surpassed the atrocious treatment of Hector's body by Achilles, when he dragged the living Batis, with holes bored through his feet, behind a chariot driven by himself amidst the acclamations of his army.

The relation of the Greeks in the *Iliad* to the Trojans and their Asiatic allies is remarkable. The Asiatics are enemies, and they are inferior to the Greeks in military discipline; but they are not barbarous or objects of contempt; far from it. Priam, Hector, Aeneas are perfectly on a par with their Greek counterparts. The parting of a Trojan chief from his wife is the subject of the most beautiful picture in the *Iliad*. Troy is the peculiar object of regard to the Hellenic Zeus. Athene is worshipped in Troy. Language is no barrier between the Greek and the Trojan chiefs. Paris, the guilty author of the war, is a gay Lothario, rather contemptible but not hateful, on the contrary amusing and attractive in his way. The Greek Diomed and the Asiatic Glaucus are bound by an ancestral tie of friendship to each other. This would seem to accord pretty well with the relation of the Greeks to the Lydian dynasties as depicted by Herodotus. Two chiefs of the Trojan alliance, Aeneas, chief of the Dardanians and Sarpedon, chief of the Lycians, are sons of Hellenic deities; Aeneas of Aphrodite, Sarpedon of Zeus. In the Dardanian dynasty Homer evidently felt a local interest. From Strabo's account of the Lycian Confederation it would seem that the Lycians were Hellenized. This could hardly have taken place in a very prehistoric age.

It has been said that iron is scarce in Homer and that he therefore belongs to the copper age. Copper is the prevalent metal and the material of armor; but iron does not appear to be very scarce.<sup>1</sup> The proverbial phrase "iron heart"<sup>2</sup> seems also to show familiarity with iron. The axles of the chariots are of iron; the clash of battle is described as "*σιδήρεος ὀρρυμαγδός*."<sup>3</sup> Little, therefore, can be based in this case on the metallic distinction of eras.

Homer tells you distinctly that his story belongs not to his own age but to an heroic age that is passed. The men of his own time are degenerate; they cannot wield such weapons as the heroes wielded or hurl such stones as the heroes hurled.<sup>4</sup> To what extent the reproduction of the past goes we can hardly divine. But the war of single combats is pretty clearly a part of it. In Virgil, through the descriptions of the camp of Aeneas, Roman castramentation is seen. In the *Iliad*, beside the chivalrous war of single

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, XXIII. 834.

<sup>2</sup> *Iliad*, XXIV. 205, 501 and elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> *Iliad*, XVII. 424.

<sup>4</sup> *Iliad*, V. 304 and XIX. 389.



combats, we see the republican phalanx marshalled and moving in serried order to battle, though when brought upon the field it seems for the most part to stand at gaze while the chieftains on both sides come forward, in the fashion of an age of chivalry, to encounter each other. Perhaps the Gargantuan feasts with their enormous masses of meat, strongly contrasted with "light Attic fare," belong also to the heroic past. The prediction that the descendants of Aeneas should reign in Dardania<sup>1</sup> is evidently history in the guise of prophecy and throws back the heroic founder of the line to an age far anterior to that of the poet.

Homer's ships are more intensely real than his horses. About the horses there is a good deal that is mythical. Some of them are of divine lineage. They talk and weep. Andromache gives Hector's horses wine as if it were a familiar practice. The ships on the other hand are intensely real. Homer evidently revels in everything nautical; in the details of ship-building, in the handling of the galley, in the even sweep of her oars, in her bounding over the dark blue wave which roars round her as she speeds upon her way.

“ἐν δ' ἄνεμος πρήσεν μέσον ἱστίον, ἀμφὶ δὲ κῆρυα  
στείρουσσι πορυβόμεον μεγάλη ἄλγε νηὸς ἰούσης·  
ἣ δ' ἔθξεν κατὰ κῆρυα διαπρήσσουσα κέλευθον.”<sup>2</sup>

The broad-built merchantman (φορτίδος ἐβρέτης)<sup>3</sup> is distinguished from the swift galley showing an advanced state of naval construction. The descriptions of the sea and nautical similes are always full of intense life. This designates the writer as a native of one of the maritime colonies in Asia Minor.

It would seem that religious faith in Homer's time was in an advanced stage of decay, and was giving way to a light scepticism which permitted fun to be made of the deities. We are prepared for a good deal in the way of sincere anthropomorphism, as well as of moral obliquities in gods made by man after his own image. But can we suppose that an intellect of such depth as that of Homer is not making fun of the deities when he represents Zeus as gaily recounting to Here his wandering loves, and as challenging the whole pantheon to a "tug of war"; when he makes gods cuff each other or be wounded by men; when he tells us the story of Ares and Aphrodite committing *crim. con.* and being captured by the injured Hephaestus amid the general laughter of Olympus? Formal reverence is still paid to the gods, and they are acknowledged as up-

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, XX. 308.

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, I. 481-483.

<sup>2</sup> *Odyssey*, V. 250.

holders of the right and avengers of wrong. The belief in omens still prevails, and is used for a poetic purpose ; but Hector is made to say that he cares little for them and that the best of all omens is to be fighting for one's country. The freedom of personification which produces such beings as Ate, Eris, and Litai (prayers) also looks like a sign of a mind little trammelled by belief in the pantheon. Here again we surely find ourselves in contact with an age of thought far from primeval, as well as with the light and sceptical spirit of the Asiatic Greek.

The Catalogue of the Ships, as it is called, remains a puzzle on any hypothesis, and a puzzle on any hypothesis it is likely to remain. Of all passages in the *Iliad* it is the one most easily detached, and the one the authenticity of which is most questioned, though its character seems to me to be Homeric. The poet appeals to the muses for his knowledge of the facts, and the muses only could have imparted to him the mythical muster-roll of the mythical fleet of Agamemnon. Its ethnography extends to the Asiatics as well as to the Greeks. It describes the Peloponnesus as it was before the Dorian invasion, a group of old Greek principalities under a sort of suzerainty of the Lords of Mycenae, without Dorian ascendancy or the Dorian Sparta. Whether its ethnography is correct or is as loose as Homer's topography of the Troad, we have no means of ascertaining. He was not a cartographer, but a highly imaginative poet. A refugee from the Dorian invasion might naturally speak of the land of his origin as it was before the conquest. But on this point we are in the dark and in the dark we are likely to remain.

All dates before the first Olympiad (776 B. C.) are uncertain, among the rest that of the Dorian invasion of Peloponnesus, dislodged by which, and perhaps by other tribal disturbances, Greeks, carrying with them the civilization which has left its monuments at Mycenae, emigrated to the coast of Asia Minor and there founded little maritime commonwealths.

There can be no doubt that the author of the *Iliad* was a denizen of the north coast of Asia Minor. The north and west winds blow to him from Thrace.<sup>1</sup> He plainly claims a personal knowledge of the Troad :

ἔσσι δέ τις προπάροιθε πόλιος αἰπὲρ ἄχολώνη.<sup>2</sup>

The perpetuation of the dynasty of Aeneas seems also, as has been said, to be a local touch. In the *Odyssey*, speaking of Ithaca and the adjacent islands, Homer is evidently beyond the range of his geographical knowledge. His slighting mention of Miletus as in the

<sup>1</sup> *Iliad*, IX. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Iliad*, II. 811.

hands of Carians, which, however, it had been before the Greek invasion of Asia Minor, seems to indicate that he belonged, not to the Ionian, but to the Aeolian, settlements, though he might be familiar with both, and by his intercourse with the Ionians afford them ground for claiming him as a denizen.

The siege of Troy would be a natural subject for a poet belonging to one of the maritime cities of Asia Minor whose land had been won in war from the Asiatics. Equally congenial to him would be a story of maritime adventure such as that which is told in the *Odyssey*. But whether Homer was an Aeolian or an Ionian, it would seem that the perfection of his art, the advance of national culture which the existence of such art implies, the refinement of his sentiment, the picture of civilization which he presents, and his treatment of the popular religion, point to a later date and one nearer to the Ionian lyricists and philosophers than Herodotus believed or is generally supposed. Settle the question as we will, however, the Homeric poems are miracles, and so is Greek art. Phidias is hardly less miraculous than Homer.

GOLDWIN SMITH.